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SUCCESS IN FICTION.

THERE is the same "fatal facility" about the profession of literature that belongs to octosyllabic verse. It is not only that pen and ink and paper are within the reach of the poorest, and leisure in unwished-for abundance, but the trick of setting down what are called by courtesy "one's ideas" in writing comes very easily to a good many people. It is almost as common as the gift of small-talk, that "one weak, washy, everlasting flow of words," which, except among Fenimore Cooper's red Indians, with their charming and expressive "Ugh," is found among all peoples, nations, and languages, and is confidently believed by its possessors to be conversation. Every editor receives annually hundreds of manuscripts that leave nothing to be desired in the way of expression, and, if there was anything to be expressed, would be acceptable enough. Indeed, this deficiency (though a drawback, from the publishing point of view) itself extorts a kind of admiration; one turns over page after page of beautiful English, and wonders what it is all about; it leaves a certain vague but stately impression upon the mind, like a regiment of soldiers marking time. To what end, one asks one's self, are these well-chosen adjectives, these excellent substantives, these respectable pronouns, all marshaled together and governed by their proper verbs? I remember to have studied in my childhood a little book called "Mary's Grammar" (the only intelligible work upon the subject, by the bye, that I ever did meet with), in which all the parts of speech were personified. Mr. Adjective, Mr. Verb, and Miss Past Participle (an old maid, I suppose) really lived and moved and had their being in it, and were substantial entities. But this is unfortunately not the case with the compositions I have in my mind, where the parts of speech are intended to be auxiliary, but help me to nothing. An example that will occur to every well-regulated mind—to every one, that

is, who goes to hear them — is found in sermons. How often has one had to listen to some “snowy-banded, delicate-handed, dilettante” young gentleman in the pulpit, whose discourse for five and twenty minutes is absolutely diaphanous and elusive, except for the occasional introduction of the text, to which the attention, half drowned in the sea of words, fixes itself and clings till it is washed off again. When, in the somewhat cynical words of the Rubric, he “lets us depart,” it is absolutely impossible to say what it has all been about. It must be remembered, however, that the preacher has a hard task. It is given only to a very few to make spiritual things tangible — a very difficult and dangerous feat, reminding one of the (reported) achievements of those Indian thaumaturgists who, before performing their prodigies, balance themselves up in mid-air to begin with. The priest, too, is weighted by his sense of reverence, which forbids him to speak familiarly even of matters that he does understand. The professor of ethics, who has certainly no such scruples, does not succeed much better in making himself intelligible.

The disciples of literature of whom I speak have no such excuse, yet are equally inefficacious. They besiege the Temple of Fame in thousands, and exclaim with indignation that envy and jealousy, in the concrete form of “Clique,” have closed its gates against them. “With this excellent gift of literary expression of ours,” they inquire, “how is it otherwise possible that we do not succeed?” The answer is plain but impolite: Because, my good sirs, you have nothing particular to say. It is a very common circumstance, and one of which there is no ground to complain. The vast majority of the human race, amongst which are the best, the bravest, and perhaps even the wisest of us, are in the same condition. The greatest statesmen, the greatest lawyers, the greatest soldiers, have often labored, and still labor, under the same deficiency, which, however, is no disadvantage. They have no particular message to deliver to the human race; but neither they nor it are any the worse for it. The word “message,” by the bye, is open to misconstruction; it is the favorite term of highfalutin writers, when describing some pet poet, generally dead. Rossetti, I observe, for instance, is frequently spoken of in this way pretty much as if he were Moses. The founder of this school, though he was much more genial and had none of their affectations, was the old Scotch

critic, George Gilfillan. He would speak of rather "one-horse" literary productions as though they were coaches and four. "It is no more possible to imagine a world without an Evangeline," he would say, "than without"—I forget what, but perhaps a sun. In his view, every creditable stanza was a "message," and the author had a divine commission to compose it.

In my opinion, this special license is not necessary for the publication of a literary work (though it is probable that all men who succeed in letters have a consciousness of their peculiar fitness for that calling); but what is absolutely indispensable to success is a clear conception of what one has to say. Their deficiency in this respect is the cause of failure of that great army of martyrs (to the "bad taste" of the public and the "neglect" of editors), the amateurs. When one's own ideas upon a subject are hazy, how is it possible to dilate upon it without its becoming more and more hazy! It is like submitting a bad photograph to the process of enlargement, by which the defects become exaggerated, and what likeness it did possess disappears. Yet nothing is more familiar to me, in that unfortunate position of literary adviser to the human race, in which one act of indiscretion* has placed me, than the inquiry from people whose talents, tastes, and even sex I know nothing of, "Would you be kind enough to give me a subject to write about? I find that my only difficulty." Very likely; but it is, unfortunately, as regards imaginative literature at least, an insuperable one. With respect to journalism, in which is to be found, of course, very admirable literary work, this, it must be admitted, is not the case. The suggester of the subject and the man who writes upon it are often different persons. Years ago I had the compliment paid me of being asked by the editor of a great political organ to become a leading-article writer. I expressed my acknowledgments, but ventured to hint that I had not the necessary knowledge, and, in short, nothing particular to say upon the matters in question. "My good sir," said the great man, encouragingly, "we will stuff you like a chicken." The story-teller who is to make any mark in the world cannot be stuffed. He may, indeed, get his first conception of his story from a chance conversation, or from a newspaper paragraph, or even possibly from a dream; but the main trunk of the tale and

* The writing of the paper, "The Literary Calling," in the "Nineteenth Century."

the chief ramifications of it must be his own. Moreover, having once got it, he must let it grow. The germ of a plot in the true novelist's mind is as a grain of mustard-seed; its vegetation in that fertile soil, if it be let alone, is tropical; but if he proceeds with it prematurely, it produces mere mustard and cress.

It is the impulse of all young writers who find themselves struck with an idea, instead of presenting the other cheek for more, to sit down and begin operations. Yet they can hardly commit a graver error; the longer they chew the cud of their plot, the better. They may dwell upon it, pen in hand, if it must be so; but that should be only to draw the outline and chronicle suggestions; they should think upon it, "in the steamship, in the railway," or in "following the plow upon the mountain-side," if that happens to be their occupation; at high noon, and in the lonely watches of the night—in a word, everywhere and at all times (except, I need hardly say, at church). Their story will in time grow upon them, till they begin to lead two lives, one of the work-a-day kind, and the other amongst the scenes and characters that they have thus evolved, not from their "inner consciousness," but from that union of imagination and observation, the offspring of which never fails to receive a welcome from the world and is sometimes recognized as Genius. They must also have some faculty of insight into character. I doubt whether a man who makes mistakes in choosing his friends can ever become a novelist. This gift of intuition, however, has its drawbacks; like all others, it is increased by cultivation, and in the end is apt to render its possessor not only fastidious (which deprives him of the pleasures of general society), but incapable of looking upon those he loves, and to whose weaknesses he would fain be blind, with uncritical eyes. One whose knowledge of mankind is now universally acknowledged, and who had had it sharpened in this way by professional study, once playfully offered his services to a city friend in a large way of business as a moral detective. "If you will give me ten minutes' conversation with any client," he said, "I will tell you if he is a scoundrel or not, and separate for you your sheep from your goats." "Thank you very much," replied the other frankly, "but your office would be a sinecure; we have only to do with goats."

Fertility of imagination, then, observation, and intuition may be said to be the natural gifts that are essential to the success

of the novelist. Without them, it is just possible, through some particular incident making an extraordinary impression on his mind, that a man may write a single narrative (not a novel) that will bring him some reputation; but that lucky stroke will not be repeated, and if story-telling is to be his profession, he must possess other attributes, of a more ordinary kind indeed, but hardly less essential to success. He must not spare pains, nor shrink from trouble. There is a foolish notion abroad that unless the spirit moves a writer in some almost supernatural manner, his work will never rise to excellence, and that the very necessity of study and forethought almost presupposes an absence of genius. It is quite true that some of the most admirable poems of our language have been written at a sitting, and under a strong impulse of the mind (or, if you will, of the soul) that falls little short of inspiration; but it is an error to suppose that whole novels break forth from an author's imagination in three volumes. Any one who has read with care the lives of our great novelists must be aware indeed that quite the contrary is the case. The idea, it is true, may be born after that fashion, but the working it out involves toil and study, the reading of unattractive books, travel, and a hundred inconveniences abhorrent to the indolent mind. Unhappily, the literary mind is naturally indolent. In many of what are called "the inferior works" of our great writers, failure is distinctly to be traced, not to any falling off in the writer's powers, but to that disinclination to take pains which comes with advancing years, especially when accompanied with popularity. Sure of his audience, the author is too often tempted to let this stand as it is, and that run as it will, rather than trouble himself, as of old, to make sure of his ground, to avoid discrepancies, or carefully to collect his threads together at the close of his weaving. The same thing occurs in ordinary life: the merchant, once so keen in his business affairs, becomes automatic; the parson, formerly so conscientious and painstaking about his sermons, discharges that duty in a more perfunctory manner. This slipshod system, dangerous to the best-established reputation, is fatal to the young novelist. By him, at all events, success is never found that way; it comes by an opposite road.

There is a matter besides reputation, though included in it, that is generally of some consequence to the man of letters, but to which I feel some delicacy in alluding. The novelist is not

only understood by the public to possess inspiration, but also in a manner to live upon it, or at all events on something like it—air. The notion of getting money by literature is considered vulgar, and “voted low.” Still, even the gorgeous butterfly feeds on something, and it is, therefore, hardly to be wondered at that the same necessity is imposed upon the denizens of Grub street. Among the items of success in fiction, it may therefore not be wholly degrading to allude to that of finance. As indolence detracts from excellence in literature, it is also apt to diminish the profits to be derived from it much more than in other callings. In no other will a man who is bent on success in it make it secondary, as men of letters so often do, to that of pleasure. The rising barrister, ambitious to rise higher as well as to fill his purse, will require something much more tempting than a fine morning to make him give up going to chambers, and pass the day in the country; nor does he permit the convivialities of the evening to keep him up till the small hours, and therefore to disorganize him for the work of the ensuing day. It is recorded, indeed, of the greatest wit that has ever set our tables in a roar, that he was wont to send round on “soda-water mornings” to a fellow scribe for “ink,” an euphemistic term implying a request that he would be so good as to do his work for him; but, though the gentleman in question enjoyed a high reputation in letters, he could scarcely be said to have been a conspicuous example of material success. Even indisposition, which is often only another name for disinclination for work, should not be lightly permitted to interfere with literary labor. If once a man of letters permits the consideration of his not feeling quite in the humor to excuse his taking holiday, he will find that sort of inspiration occur to him pretty often; of course there are many examples of writers that have done well for themselves in spite of this weakness, but they would have done much better if they had not given in to it; nor have men of the highest rank in literature, such as Scott and Dickens, despised those virtues of diligence and industry which are absurdly supposed to be inconsistent with great natural gifts. The vulgar phrase “it is dogged as does it” is almost as applicable to success in fiction as in law or physics. It is not too much to say that there have been more failures among men of high promise in letters through neglect of this common virtue of application than in any other calling. The

axiom adopted by the children in "Lilliput Levee," "Never do to-day what can be put off till to-morrow," has unhappily been always a favorite one with the soldiers of Captain Pen, and has sadly interfered with their promotion. As a matter of fact, there is no trade, however mechanical, that requires punctuality more than the profession of literature as it exists to-day. It is possible, indeed, as happened (late in life, however) in the case of our most popular novelist, that the imagination will not stir without the stimulus of "the thunder of the presses" demanding their tale of copy; but even leaving out the unpleasant contingency, that the writer may be seized with sudden illness* and not be able to come to time, it will hardly be contended that this is a wholesome or natural state of things.

It may surely be taken for granted that no man's work is the better for being hurried, or for the necessity of its being ready within a certain short space of time; and I need hardly say that the value of a man's literary labor is much enhanced by the knowledge, soon acquired among publishers, that his punctuality may be absolutely relied on. In these days, when novels appear in serial coincidentally in three or four English-speaking countries, to be well beforehand with his work is to the writer of fiction a very important consideration, since it enables him to make arrangements for its distribution. The days are coming, though they will not come in my time, when the popular novelist will reap these advantages much more fully, but even then the soil he cultivates will not be of that sort of which it has been said that when you tickle it with a hoe it laughs with a harvest.

While the more he reads the better, the writer of fiction must be careful not to become too bookish, and above all he must avoid such studies as cause the mind to run in grooves. Readers resent too much quotation in a story, and especially the evidences of "cram." An extreme example of this latter error is to be found in the "Last Days of Pompeii," which, however attractive to the young, repels the mature mind by the cheap

* An eminent Scottish publisher, the proprietor of a well-known magazine, used always to refuse to begin any novel in serial unless the whole of the manuscript was placed in his hands, upon the ground that "a man might die." The example of Dickens, Thackeray, Mrs. Gaskell, and Trollope, who all left unfinished serials behind them, would (had he lived to see it) have amply corroborated his views.

learning with which it bristles, and the impertinent accuracy of its foot-notes. For other men of letters the library is the place whence they gather their ideas and "hive their sweet thoughts for putting into books," but the source of the novelist's productions is or should be the page of human nature, and he must learn to read it as he runs. He should, of course, mix much with his fellow-creatures; but if this is confined to what is called "going into society," it will profit him but little. The upper ten thousand is a very small world, and by no means a picturesque one; its "views" are as conventional as itself; even when it is not dull—and there is nothing duller than your ordinary dinner-party—it is shallow; nor, in truth, is there much to be got out of it beyond first impressions. The true novelist should go further afield. Of the evil consequences of not doing so, we have only too many examples. Even in the case of such a master as Thackeray, when society and its hangers-on are taken out of his works, how scanty is their population. The same observation may be made on Trollope. With Scott and Dickens and George Eliot it is not so. The cause of this exclusiveness is not far to seek; it is indolence. The popular novelist is asked everywhere, and it is less trouble to accept invitations than to decline them. Moreover, there is something pleasant, no doubt, in being thus fêted, while to go out of one's way in search of "character" is decidedly unpleasant. It is easier to sit at home and tax the memory than to go abroad and refresh it by observation. If the British novelist would be successful, by the bye, he must not go abroad for his materials. He may visit the United States and lay his scenes there, or the American novelist may visit England and lay his scenes here, but neither of them will achieve success (worthy to be called such) if he places his life-drama on the continent and makes his *dramatis personæ* foreigners. English readers "cannot abide" foreigners. They know nothing about them, and are very far from taking *omne ignotum pro magnifico*. Of course this is not true of persons of fashion and position, who often know more about France and Italy, at least, than about their own country. But it is comparatively easy to be a fashionable novelist; I am speaking of how to become a popular one.

It is rather curious that great popularity has been very seldom achieved by any writer, with both sexes. There are men's novelists, and there are women's novelists. Not one

woman in ten thousand ever reads Fielding, I suppose; it may be said that his coarseness repels them, which, indeed, is likely enough; but even when Fielding was not considered coarse he was never popular with ladies; they preferred Richardson. Men read novels now much more than they used to. Politicians and judges are so good as to tell us that they "often take up a novel," as Sarah Butler used to relax her gigantic intellect over a book; but women still form the majority of the readers of fiction. They require the delineation of the softer passion in detail. (I am not speaking of the "vicious circle," who have vicious writers of their own sex to pander to them, but of women in general, our pure wives and sisters and daughters.) They like description, and relish minute analysis of motive. They shrink from strong situation (Lefanu appalls them); they seldom appreciate satire, they do not care for high spirits, or for humor, which is to them no disinfectant of coarseness; and on almost all these matters men have opposite tastes. I can only recall two novelists who can be said, in any extended sense, to have made conquests of both sexes. No writer, of course, can choose for himself in this matter; he must needs address his own proper audience; but there is no question, under the present conditions of literature, at least, upon which road popularity lies.

Success will never crown his efforts, let his genius be what it may, unless he possesses the simpler virtues to which I have alluded. Nay, even with them there is one sort of success, the greatest of all, which he will not make, though it is possible that his grandson may do so. The man who has arrived nearer to it than any other is Charles Dickens, but even he fell far short of it. I speak of the success that shall befall the first great novelist who is welcomed, not by tens of thousands or by hundreds of thousands,—for that happens even now,—but by millions of readers. At present,—and so it will be, perhaps, for generations to come,—to the great bulk of even the reading community,—*i. e.*, of those who read at all,—our greatest writers in all descriptions of literature are practically unknown. The first with whom it will become acquainted are undoubtedly the writers of fiction, but how long it will be before that introduction takes place it is impossible to guess. There is no master of the ceremonies to effect it. The hands that reach down from above and touch our eyes with tears, are held out in

vain to the multitude; to the mighty voices of the Past its ears are deaf; for it genius itself has no magic—nay more, it is repugnant to it. More than one attempt has been made of late by enterprising publishers to tap this tremendous reservoir; assisted by the ablest hands, they have sunk their artesian well (some magazine of a high class) through this obstinate stratum of ignorance and stupidity, with very indifferent success. This multitude still prefers “the banjo and the bones” to the most celestial music. The secret of success as regards circulation among the million is a very different matter from that with which this paper has been dealing. It has nothing to do with genius, or talent, or study, or observation, but requires a certain knack of expressing commonplace ideas in such a manner that the commonplace reader exclaims to himself, with rapture, “Why, that is the very thing I have often thought myself, but did not know how to set it down in words!” It is a mistake to suppose that tales of blood and thunder have now any great popularity; readers, even of the humblest class, are already beginning to despise the monstrosities of literature, but they still prefer to be taught, as it were, by pupil teachers—minds only a very little keener than their own—rather than by masters of the craft of story-telling. The immense popularity of Mr. Tupper’s poems, as I have elsewhere maintained, was undoubtedly owing to this cause, though, of course, even he never reached the lowest stratum. Until the sun of “Proverbial Philosophy” arose, a great class of people, who had never ventured on anything but prose, were delighted to find that they could understand what purported to be poetry. When true poetry shall be appreciated by the masses (I don’t mean those miraculously intelligent Scottish peasants whom William and Mary Howitt were always meeting with on their travels, but the real millions), the conditions under which literature is written will be changed. A more obvious example of my meaning may be gathered from what now passes among the crowd for humor. Even at penny readings, the audiences of which are comparatively select, it is not the best humorist, but the third-rate ones, that are most applauded. What passes for “exquisite fooling” at the Music Hall is so ineffably dull as to produce in an intelligent mind a feeling approaching to loathing. In such places, even the drolleries of Hood would be as unintelligible as the wit of Præd or Locker. Dickens alone, by reason,

perhaps, of his dealing with the classes in question in his fictions, as much as by his transcendent genius, has any acceptance in these Cimmerian regions; and even he only here and there. I was once conversing upon this subject with the proprietor of a certain periodical, more notorious for its popularity than for its literary merit, and ventured to ask what, in his opinion, was the secret of its extraordinary success. He replied, quite frankly, that it consisted in "never flying over the heads" of his subscribers, and in having for his editor, not, of course, a fool, but a sort of foolometer, who thoroughly understood the limits of their intelligence. It should be added, to this gentleman's credit, that he had more than once tried an infusion of genuine merit in his literary bill of fare, with the most discouraging and disastrous results.

It is hardly necessary to say that no good writer — unlike that Lord Chief Justice who drank beer to put himself on a par with the puisne judges — has ever succeeded in writing down to the level of his readers; nor is it a course to be recommended, even if it were possible to follow it. The influence of good fiction is at present in its infancy, or rather, they whose suffrages will one day spell "success" for those who shall supply it, are but babes, and have as yet no appetite for strong meat.

JAMES PAYN.